

Shifting Gears

[A Hybrid Faceoff: Kia Optima and Ford Fusion](#)

Posted: 10 Apr 2012 10:51 PM PDT



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Nobody knew what to make of the Toyota Prius when it first hit the American roadways.

It was an odd looking little car. It wasn't ugly or a plain sub-compact box with wheels. But it wasn't a styling gem, but wasn't unattractive, either. The Prius carved its own styling niche at a time when Toyota was selling hybrid efficiency, not looks.

But times have changed. The Prius has become more stylish to look at and more comfortable ride in. And its success has spawned competition – and not just at the sub-compact level. The Cadillac Escalade hybrid anchors the opposite end of the fuel efficient spectrum and, if you want high end, sports car efficiency, there is the Porsche Panamera hybrid offering relative fuel efficiency at more than 150 miles per hour.

But for the average household looking for hybrid efficiency in a family sedan, there are now significant options stretching from Korea, with the Kia Optima; to Detroit, where Ford has rolled out the Fusion Hybrid.



With the Optima, Kia continues its tradition of offering a lot in a car for less. At \$32,000, the stylish, midsized, Optima sedan meets a lot of family needs. On the outside, the Optima looks like a sport sedan, with a wide racing grill and black side air scoops which makes it the type of car State Police just love to follow. And there is good reason for cops to keep an eye on the Optima: It is such a quiet, well shielded car that there is virtually no wind sound in the cabin even when the car is rolling on 17-inch wheels past 100 miles per hour. The Optima makes it real easy to lose your license, even though it has a modest power plant and is sluggish when taking off.

Under the hood, the Optima has a 2.4-liter, four-cylinder engine producing just 166 horsepower and 154 pound-feet of torque. It is paired with an electric motor producing an additional 40.2 horsepower and 151 pound-feet torque which. The combined power plant produces a lot of horsepower for a relatively light-weight vehicle. But the combined 300+ pound-feet of torque, going directly to the wheels, allows the Optima to be extremely responsive once it gets going

In the fuel department, the Optima Hybrid carries an EPA rating of 35 miles per gallon in stop-and-go driving, and 40 miles per gallon on the highway. While the EPA estimates are usually exaggerated, the test car got 38 miles per gallon in mixed driving. . While most full hybrids allow the car to be driven in electric-only mode for just the first 25 or so miles per hour, the Optima can drive on just its electric power plant at speeds up to 62 miles per hour. That is why the stats for this hybrid are reversed, with higher gas savings on the highway than in the city where frequent accelerations lower the performance.



Kia did not cut costs in the interior features, either, beginning with the wood accents and the double, powered sunroof. One would expect quality, ventilated leather seats in a

\$32,000 car, as well as the ability to heat the pair in front. But the Optima goes one better by offering heated *and* air conditioned front seats as well as heated rear seats – an option usually found only in high end luxury cars – and a heated steering wheel.

For entertainment there is a 7-inch touch screen for the easy to use navigation systems and the clear backup camera. The Optima has Sirius satellite radio, which also provides the navigation system with traffic and weather updates. The package is rounded off with USB, iPod and MP3 connections and Bluetooth for cell phone or audio use. The entertainment, Bluetooth, and cruise controls can all be accessed via fingertip controls on the steering wheel.

But you can't get to Korea without passing Detroit, where the folks at Ford have something to say. You need a large parking lot to handle all the competitors in the midsize sedan category, since all the car makers have at least one entry in the segment. The question they all faced was how to carve a niche and manage to stand out in the crowd chasing the Toyota Camry?

For the folks with the crayons at Ford, the answer was the Fusion, a car with its own distinct styling characteristics, including a wide, three-layered grill. And if you put together a checklist of the most popular items or enduring features in the Toyota Camry, Chevy Malibu, Nissan Altima, Hyundai Sonata, or Honda Accord, for example, you could check off virtually all of them in the Fusion.



For those interested in fuel economy, there is the Fusion Hybrid. The Fusion Hybrid's gasoline engine itself is rather anemic, a 2.5-liter, four cylinder engine producing 152 horsepower and 136 pound-feet of torque. Its electric motor cranks out 35 horsepower, and 106 pound-feet of torque. Together, it's a small power plant, and you are not going to do any drag racing in a fusion. But then, you don't get a hybrid if you have a lead foot.

This is a full, dual motor system, meaning you can drive up to about 47 miles per hour on just the 40 horse power electric motor. That's faster than any other hybrid on the road except the Optima. But Ford's electric motor can accelerate at higher speeds than the Optima without engaging the gasoline engine for support. They accomplish this with a form of battery overdrive system. As a rule, hybrids never completely run down their batteries –

there is about a 15% to 20% reserve. With the fusion, there is an “Eco boost” which taps the reserve for additional power on acceleration, power provided on most hybrids by engaging the gasoline engine.

That helps explain why the Fusion Hybrid has an EPA rating of 41 miles per gallon in stop-and-go driving – 10 MPG higher than the Toyota Camry Hybrid – and 36 miles per gallon on the highway. The Fusion also encourages you to drive in the most economic fashion with an animated set of gauges in the form of green leaves which wave in an electronic breeze when happiest.

Inside, the Fusion has a powered sunroof over the front, and both the seats and doors are padded with leather, thick, attractive, double stitched leather. The front seats can be heated and are power adjusted. The rear seats, while not heated, have enough leg room for



passengers who stretch well over six feet.

For entertainment, the Fusion uses the SYNC communications system, with its voice or touch activated screen, audio, and cell phone link. The navigation system is an easy one to use, with traffic and weather warnings and rerouting provided by the satellite radio service. The backup screen has one of the clearest cameras on the market, with guidelines to help motorists judge how far they are from an obstruction.

The Fusion offers Sirius satellite radio with a 12-speaker Sony sound system, as well as USB, iPhone and MP3 connections. There is also Bluetooth for phone or audio connections. The large battery also powers a 110 volt regular power outlet to plug in a computer or game console, in addition to the regular power outlets for cell phones.

Whether or not the Ford Fusion Hybrid and Kia Optima Hybrid can overtake the hybrid version of the leading Toyota Camry remains to be seen. But as they energize their batteries, they are likely to give the leader a run for the money.



2012 Kia Optima Hybrid

MSRP: **\$32,250**

EPA Mileage: **35 MPG City** **40 MPG Highway**

Performance / Safety:

2.4-Liter aluminum DOHC 4-cylinder engine producing 166 horsepower and 154 pound/feet of torque; electric motor with 270-vlt Lithium-polymer battery producing 40 horsepower and 151 pound/feet of torque; 6-speed automatic transmission; stability and traction controls; anti-lock brakes; 17-inch alloy wheels; independent front and rear suspension; fog lights and high density headlights; backup camera; dual front airbags; front seat side airbags; full-length side curtain airbags.

Interior / Comfort:

AM/FM/Sirius satellite radio; Infinity Audio system with 8 speakers; MP3, iPod, and USB connections; CD player; Bluetooth phone and audio; voice-activated entertainment system; navigation system with satellite traffic and weather; leather wrapped, tilt and telescoping, steering wheel with fingertip audio, phone and cruise controls; heated steering wheel;

heated rear seats; heated or air cooled front seats; powered leather seats; powered sunroof.

2012 Ford Fusion Hybrid

MSRP: **\$32,820**

EPA Mileage: **41 MPG City** **36 MPG Highway**

Performance / Safety:

2.5-Liter, aluminum DOHC 4-cylinder engine producing 156 horsepower and 136 pound-feet of torque; electric motor with 275-volt Nickel-metal hydride battery producing 35 horsepower and 106 pound-feet of torque; front wheel drive; independent front and rear suspension; rack and pinion steering; 4-wheel power disc brakes; anti-locking brake system; stability and traction control; 17-inch, 15-spoke aluminum wheels; side and curtain front and rear air bags.

Interior / Comfort:

AM/FM/Sirius satellite radio; Sony audio system with 12 speakers; MP3, iPod, and USB connections; CD player; Bluetooth phone and audio; voice-activated entertainment system; navigation system with satellite traffic and weather; leather wrapped, tilt and telescoping steering with fingertip audio, phone and cruise controls; heated front seats; powered sunroof.